And Oh, How They Love Her...

Velma Fruhling: She's Number One

By MORGAN GENDEL
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The 50 members of the Willis Jepson Junior High School Concert Chorus are lined up on the risers in the choir practice room. They are in full performance costume, as eager and anxious as if they stood before their parents and friends at a live concert.

One hundred eyes are on Velma Fruhling's baton as it snaps into position over her head. The choir breathes a short gasp of air in unison, as the baton lifts slightly upward and then lunges down and the first note of the song leaps from 50 mouths — crisp, clear, perfectly synchronized.

The song lasts less than a syllable. Velma Fruhling is not satisfied with the first note.

"Come on now!" she shouts sternly. Let's do it right!"

The expression on her face is enough to scare the kids into singing the note right, but they know that Velma really cares. So the next time they give it all they've got, perhaps more than some of them knew they had. Velma lets the singing continue, still pushing the students to their limits with sharp baton movements and stern expressions. She is satisfied that they are performing to the best of their award-winning abilities...at least for a rehearsal.

Demanding Direction

Although the innate abilities of her students cannot be discounted, it is without a doubt Velma Fruhling's combination of demanding direction and sincere affection that has brought the Jepson Concert Chorus honors normally reserved for older, more experienced groups. The list of recent accomplishments is enough to dispel any doubts of that fact:

— The Concert Chorus was invited to the Bay Area Conference of Music Teachers at Hayward University last October as a demonstrator group. The California Music Educators' Education Association, which sponsored the conference, was so impressed with the choir that it invited them for return performances. At the association's April 12th convention, the Jepson choir was the only junior high group performing for the full four days of the convention. The same was true April 24 at the convention in Santa Rosa.

— Last year, Mrs. Fruhling decided to enter the state festival for the first time. The concert choir took a "superior" rating — the best there is. In repeating the feat this year, the Jepson choir received the only superior rating awarded to a junior high school group.

The skill of Mrs. Fruhling's choral direction is exemplified by these honors, but the underlying mutual affection she shares with her kids — which plays a big part in enabling them to reach the limits of their ability and beyond — is demonstrated nowhere better than in a song written especially for Mrs. Fruhling. "Velma's Song," composed by Rosalie and Ann Zupo, was sung at the spring concert last Wednesday night:

"We followed Velma from Hayward to L.A.
Singing all the way, all the night and day.
And everywhere we let them know,
She's the number one director of the show!"

Church Choirs

Velma Fruhling has been working with choral groups for most of her life. After graduating from San Jose State College, she taught for awhile, but opted to devote her time to raising a family instead. Her husband was a pastor, though, so it was only natural that Velma devoted her spare time directing church choirs.

Then in 1955, when her youngest of three children was in kindergarten, Velma returned to public school teaching. With a degree in music and elementary teaching credentials already under her belt, she went right into choral direction at the Elm School. Ten years ago, she wanted to work with "older" voices, and moved to Jepson. The choir groups there have been improving ever since.

That is in part due to the fact that Mrs. Fruhling herself has been continually improving as a choral director. Not satisfied with the teaching methods she had learned years before, Mrs. Fruhling went back to school several times, doing graduate work at the University of Stockton and Sacramento State.

What Mrs. Fruhling herself considers the most important teaching technique she has learned is called the Kodaly Method (pronounced koe-dye). Kodaly is a Hungarian singing system which works with hand signals and rhythm symbols to enable students to sight read without the aid of instrumental accompaniment. Mrs. Fruhling said that Kodaly has doubled the success she has had teaching music.

"There are a lot of teachers in America who teach by rote, but Kodaly has got the rote system beat all to pieces!" Mrs. Fruhling said with typical spunk.

Clap Rhythm

Using Kodaly, Mrs. Fruhling first teaches her students to clap out the rhythm of a new song, before a single note is sung. Eventually the words are talked out in proper rhythm. Then the notes of the song are sung in syllables (do...re...mi...), and finally the words are added. With this method, by the time they sing the complete song, the choir members know it so well that they don't even need accompaniment.

If Velma's work with the Concert Chorus demonstrates what can be accomplished when a dedicated director works with talented singers, her achievements with the two less advanced choirs are nothing short of astounding.

The advanced choir took a high excellent rating at the state festival, a rank only slightly under the Concert Choir's top prize. Equally impressive is the Introductory Choir, comprised of kids who "couldn't even carry a tune"' last fall. Unlike the more advanced groups, requirements for entry into the beginning choir are only interest and dedication, not ability. Although the group still doesn't attempt harmony parts as complex as those sung by the Concert Chorus, they sing with the volume and exuberance of real pros.

"Because we love her, we love her,
We laughed and cried in sorrow and in joy.
And everywhere we let them know
She's the number one director of the show!"

'Number One'

Toward the end of every school year, the "number one director" gets a little emotional, for she knows that the group that she has molded, literally with her bare hands, will be leaving the rehearsal hall at Jepson for the last time.

"For these youngsters it's sad," she said, "because I lose them."

Sad, too, for the many who enjoyed their concerts at the Winsor House, at school concerts, anywhere. But next year's a new year, and Velma Fruhling is already observing the talent that will be coming her way. She says that there is already a good nucleus for next year's Concert group.

Elementary school children have already began auditioning for Mrs. Fruhling. The choir level which the sixth graders will enter is determined by their ability, sense of pitch and interest. If they can carry a song unaccompanied, they've made advanced choir. Even if they cannot, introductory choir under Velma Fruhling is no low-level group.

Of course, there's occasional talk about retirement, too. Velma's children,all of whom are musical, are grown and on their own. But then, there's a continual influx of new faces, new youngsters eager to make music under Velma Fruhling's deft and affectionate instruction. There's summer school coming up, and next year's groups to think about...

"We followed Velma wherever she wanted to go,
As long as it was a show, practicing we go,
We did what she siad, whether we liked it or not
And that's how we got up to the top."

Big Hug

The thoughts of most of the kids who left Mrs. Fruhling's choral groups this year were probably reflected in the actions of several Concert Chorus girls who ran to their leader after the last rehearsal of the year.

Perhaps there were tears in their eyes, but they were still ebullient from their most recent performance as they hugged Mrs. Fruhling.

"We couldn't have done it without you, Mrs. Fruhling," one girl said.

Velma Fruhling set her baton down, close at hand, and hugged them all back.

AT THE PIANO — Mrs. Fruhling accompanies the Concert Chorus (in the background) as they perform for an appreciative audience at the Winsor House. (Reporter Photo)

AND A-ONE, AND A-TWO — Velma Fruhling uses a fairly new method of singing instruction which combines hand signals and rhythm symbols. Her Concert Chorus can sight-read a piece without accompaniment. (Reporter Photo)

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